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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [GA](#)

SUBJECT: OPPOSITION LEADER CHARGED WITH SPYING AND SEDITION

Classified by Amb. Barry L. Wells, Reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

#### Summary

¶1. (C) On Wednesday, March 11, 2009, opposition politician and former presidential candidate Mr. Halifa Sallah appeared in court charged with spying, acting with seditious intent and leading a procession without a police permit. Sallah was arrested March 8 and is likely to remain in detention because of the tough bail conditions set by the magistrate which are virtually impossible for Sallah to meet. Currently held a Mile 2 Prison he is reportedly also being denied visitors including his wife. His arrest was probably related to his efforts to expose and criticize the activities of a team of witchdoctors who have, with the apparent support of government security forces, been detaining people they accuse of practicing magic and forcing them to disavow witchcraft and pledge loyalty to the president over the past two months. The implications for press freedom and political rights are grim and post is seeking opportunities to raise this issue with the government in a productive way. Unhappiness about the witch hunting campaign is also growing and could potentially lead to political unrest, even in generally calm Banjul.

#### Sallah's Arrest

¶2. (U) Sallah is the Coordinator of the National Alliance for Democracy and Development (NADD) and was its presidential candidate in September 2006. He is the publisher of the opposition newspaper, "Foroyaa", which over the past two months has carried numerous reports of the activities of a team of Guinean witchdoctors reportedly hired by President Jammeh to identify so-called "witches" and civil servants disloyal to his administration. Some members of the security services and many private citizens have been detained in this campaign according to news reports and eyewitness accounts, including a report from a U.S. Peace Corps volunteer. Forayaa has reported extensively on the witch-hunting campaign, with sensationalist headlines, and it has filled online newspapers run by Gambians overseas, but other media outlets have largely ignored the campaign, probably due to fear of government reaction.

¶3. (U) Sallah was arrested at his home on March 8 by plainclothes security officers, and held in detention until his court appearance on March 11, when he was charged with "spying, acting with seditious intent and leading a procession without a police permit". The Nigerian-born magistrate presiding over the trial, Kayode Olagubutu, set Sallah's bail bond at one million dalasi (USD38,461) to be undertaken by three notable Gambians who must be a retired Brigadier General, a former Inspector General of Police (IGP) and a village chief. These conditions make it virtually impossible for Sallah, as current Armed Forced Chief Tamba is the only military officer ever to achieve the rank of General in many years, and he is not retired. It would also be extremely unlikely for a former IGP (of which there are only a few in The Gambia) to come forward to vouch for Sallah in this politically charged case.

¶4. (U) On March 8, Sallah went to the villages of Makumbaya and Jamburr where previously the witchdoctors, escorted by armed military personnel and militant young supporters of the governing party called "the Green Boys and Girls" took away several people they reportedly identified as witches for "cleansing". According to "Foroyaa", 60 people, many of old age, were taken away from Jamburr on January 28 and held for several days at a house in Kotu. There they say they were forcibly bathed and made to drink an unknown liquid concoction. The

Imam of the village, Arfang Karamo Bojang, who was one of the abductees, told the newspaper that he refused to drink the unknown liquid. He said all those who drank the liquid became drowsy or unconscious. Foroyaa also reported that an old lady named Isatou Badjie of Makumbaya, died on February 4 at the Royal Victoria Teaching Hospital in Banjul three days after she was released by the witchdoctors who took her way along with other people from the village.

¶15. (U) Sallah first spoke out against the rituals at a news conference on February 10, at which he urged the government to investigate and stop the activities of the witchdoctors. He said he was prompted to speak out after the son of a female detainee, one Jonyi Sonko of Essau village, narrated his mother's ordeal. Foroyaa has also carried interviews with several people in the village of Essau, who say they were arrested against their will and subjected to the ritual.

#### Witch-Hunting, Jammeh Style

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¶16. (U) According to media sources, the team of witchdoctors arrived in The Gambia in early January and immediately set to work in the President's home village of Kanilai. They later reportedly moved to the capital Banjul where they visited a number of government offices and security installations to perform their rituals.

¶17. (U) According to eyewitness accounts related to POL/ECON FSNs and to press reports, the group is led by a middle-aged man dressed in a frightening red outfit from head to toe. On arrival at a place to be "cleansed", the witchdoctors beat sacred drums and slaughtered a bull or a goat while the team leader recited certain words and poured some liquid on the ground before calling forward those he suspects of witchcraft for screening. Witnesses do not know what criteria he uses to make his selections, but he does tend to select older people, including a fair number of highly-respected village leaders. He then orders his suspects to untie their jujus (fetishes worn by many Gambians) from their bodies and then begins to recount what he alleges are "unhealthy activities" by the suspects. According to these witnesses, the man then forced them to drink an unknown liquid concoction and made civil servants swear loyalty and allegiance to President Jammeh and his government. They are reportedly threatened with severe consequences for breaking the oath.

¶18. (U) For suspected "witches", the team leaders reportedly soak their heads in an unknown liquid and order them to confess all their "evil" doings. They are then arrested and taken to various locations, where they are sometimes held several hours or even several days before being released. There are no reports yet that anyone has been formally charged in relation to this campaign.

¶19. (U) The witchdoctors have reportedly already carried out their rituals at the Gambia Police Force headquarters, the Gambia Navy, the Department of Immigration, the national electricity and water company NAWEC, the state-owned telecommunications company GAMTEL, the Kanifing Municipal Council, some local markets, and several villages in the Western part of The Gambia.

¶10. (U) According to Foroyaa, several people, including butchers at the main abattoir in Abuko who have been labeled as "witches" and some civil servants accused of engagement in "unhealthy activities" that threaten the government, have been arrested. On January 20, one FSN saw a group of women said to be self-confessed witches bundled into a waiting bus outside a former government residence in the town of Bakau, seven kilometers outside Banjul.

¶11. (C) On March 9 a PC volunteer stationed upcountry reported that the witch-hunting campaign had visited his village, and that frightened villagers had urged him to hide their children. PC volunteers have been advised not to get involved in what could be a volatile situation.

#### Government Involvement

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¶12. (C) The GOTG has remained silent on the issue despite the continuous reports in Foroyaa and several online newspapers run by Gambian dissidents based overseas. Officials the Embassy has asked about it have declined to comment or said they know nothing about it. However, credible reports indicate the witchdoctors are being driven

around in government vehicles and are escorted by security officers in uniform and other security agents as well as militants from the President's APRC party. The Embassy intends to continue to raise the issues of press freedom and illegal arrests and detentions with our GOTG contacts, and is looking for an appropriate public way to highlight the importance of freedom of expression, perhaps in concert with the UK High Commission.

Comment

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¶13. (C) The arrest of Sallah, following as closely as it does the arrest of Pap Saine, is sharp blow to freedom of expression in The Gambia. We are also concerned at the return to prominence of the "Green Boys", who have a grim reputation for political dirty work and intimidation in the early years of Jammeh's reign. It is unclear whether the government merely intends to intimidate Sallah and Saine or really intends to imprison them, but either is a negative development. Jammeh has tolerated criticism from the Forayaa newspaper for many years, perhaps because the tiny NADD party and Sallah offer no realistic threat to his government, but that toleration has clearly come to an end, given the severity of the charges against Sallah. Much of the reporting on the witchhunting campaign is sensationalist and of dubious credibility, but enough credible testimony has emerged that we have little doubt something significant is going on. Our local staff and some of our other Gambian contact are more agitated by this than by anything else in the last few years, perhaps because, in targeting respected elders, the witch-hunters are striking a cultural nerve. Some have even spoken about the possibility of political unrest if the campaign does not come to a stop, hard as that is to imagine in placid Banjul, where everyone smiles and conflict is avoided at almost all costs. We are unsure what is behind the witch-hunting campaign and trying to get an answer will be difficult, as no one official is willing to discuss it, but we will continue trying. However, it is clear that Jammeh is not prepared to tolerate criticism of his government and himself, and is willing to take harsh measures to silence critics.

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